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ABSTRACT

The avoidance of interpersonal confrontations is a behavioral pattern which seems to be common to small homogeneous island cultures. At the University of Guam, a quasi-experimental study was designed to investigate this confrontation avoidance phenomenon in Guam and Micronesia. This paper presents a description of that study and a discussion of the social context of confrontation avoidance strategies. The questionnaire which was administered to participants in the study is also included. It consists of a series of situations describing events and conditions which could occur in different parts of Micronesia. Participants were asked to select alternative solutions to the situations--some entailing confrontation and others avoiding it--and to comment upon their selection. The questionnaire results are reviewed briefly in the paper.
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CONFRONTATION AVOIDANCE IN ISLAND CULTURES

Some Observations in Guam and Micronesia

INTRODUCTION

The avoidance of interpersonal confrontations is a behavioral pattern which seems to be common to small homogeneous island cultures.¹

As part of an investigation into the impact of socio-cultural factors on the development process in Guam and Micronesia, a group of University of Guam professors organized a quasi-experimental research project designed to gain some measure of this confrontation-avoidance phenomenon in that geographical area. Guamanian, Micronesian, and "Stateside" students from the University were brought together and asked to discuss and respond to specific choices related to hypothetical case studies. Each of these "mini case studies" or situations involved elements of change and conflict representative of real life situations that can be found today in Guam and Micronesia.

The 122 participants in what was billed as an all day seminar were divided into groups of six to eight. Most of the

1. Howard Allen. Aint't No Big Thing The University Press of Hawaii. Honolulu 1974. Howard documents this phenomenon in a Hawaiian-American community on Oahu.

groups had at least one representative from each geographical area (Guam, Micronesia: "outer islanders" and district center, and American "statesiders") along with a group leader who read the situations and served as a recorder.

The students read along with the group leader and following each situation they marked on their own sheets one of the choices of action presented. They were then asked to individually reveal and explain their own choices. Space was provided below the choices to write their explanation or otherwise qualify their response if they wished. There were thirty cases and it took approximately three hours to complete the process. A more informal dialogue was held over beer and a barbecue at a nearby beach for the rest of the day. The barbecue had been offered as an inducement to the participants and it proved to be well worth the investment in terms of both good will and the insights that were generated as the afternoon wore on.

DISCUSSION

The results of the experiment generally verified our expectations. In most of the situations in which one of the choices for action involved a confrontation of some sort, the "stateside" respondents were more likely than the "island" respondents to opt for a confrontation-oriented choice. Furthermore amongst the islanders: the Guamanian respondents were more likely than the Micronesians to opt for a confrontational solution

and amongst the Micronesians, those from the more developed district centers of the Trust Territory² tended to be more confrontation-oriented in their responses than their fellow Micronesians from the more remote outer islands.

In many of the situations the "confrontational" choice was very overt calling for a direct interpersonal confrontation; in others it was more implied. For example, in the situation involving a proposed commercial fishing venture on an island with a traditional distribution pattern (B2), the act of confrontation would be to "join the business" as this would be in direct confrontation with the community at large. Sensitive to this, only 30% of the "outer island respondents" chose this otherwise tempting choice as compared to 55% from the district centers, 66% from Guam, and 91% of the Statesiders.

APPLICATION

If the pattern that emerged in this or similar experiments can be accepted as valid, it sets the stage for a number of interesting questions which the respondents in such an exercise can begin to explore themselves in order to gain further insights into the origins of their own behavior and attitudes as well as the behavior and attitudes of others from different socio-cultural backgrounds. To further appreciation of the sources

2. Micronesia and Trust Territory are used interchangeably here

and manifestations of confrontation avoidance, the underlying concepts should be explored through discussion with the participants.

As described in the literature, the strategy of confrontation avoidance rests upon affiliation orientation. As such it is quite different from confrontational social strategies which are based upon achievement orientation. In his book on the subject, Allan Howard observed that "confrontations are inevitable for persons who seek to raise their status relative to others;" Avoiding confrontation helps to minimize social disharmony and in small island societies the maintenance of social harmony can be a necessity for survival.

In practice, the strategy of confrontation-avoidance involves the following traits:

1. Avoidance of discussing issues that might be decisive;
2. Emphasis upon cooperative activities in which social relationships are continually reaffirmed;
3. Acceptance of arbitrary decisions;
4. Little expression of preference despite strong feelings;
5. Maintenance of a level of purposeful ambiguity in order to protect self and others;
6. An unwillingness to intrude physically or socially.

The strategy seems to be the product of a number of interrelated factors, including closely intertwined kinship networks, extended family household requirements, a complex web of competing social relationships, and a reliance upon intimate knowledge of one another and upon nonverbal cues to ascertain appropriate responses.

Finally, given the strategy and its manifestations, it can be asked: What are the implications for the users of this strategy within the context of a modern achievement-oriented setting? What are the implications for one who has been a lifetime user of confrontation strategy (consciously or unconsciously) in an affiliation-oriented setting? And, along these same lines, what are the implications for the training of people who will be working across these cultural settings with their radically different coping strategies.

CHANGE CONFLICT AND CHOICES IN MICRONESIA

Introduction/instructions:

On the following pages you will be asked to read a series of situations describing possible events and conditions which either have occurred or could occur, in different parts of Micronesia. You will be asked to imagine that each situation is confronting you. After each situation choices as to courses of action are provided. You will be asked to select one of the choices. A comments section is also provided following each set of answers where you can explain why you made the choice that you did, or you can qualify your answer. This section is optional.

- A1. You are on another Island and you have been looking for a job for five months and at last succeeded. You have been told to start tomorrow, but have just received a message telling you that your grandfather died yesterday. If you go home you will lose the job. If you do not go home your family will be very upset.

Do You: a. Go home _____
 b. Start the job _____

Comments: _____

- A2. You have just gotten married and you have the choice of living on your home Island or on another Island. Because both you and your spouse are working you know that your relatives will always be expecting you to lend them money and that you will not be able to buy some of the things that you want, such as a car and a refrigerator. This would not be a problem on the other Island.

Would You: a. Choose the job on your home Island _____
 b. Choose the job on the other Island _____

Comments: _____

- A3. After you have been married for six months move into your house and they then begin to run it as if it were their own. Your in-laws are from a different culture and do not understand your ways.

Would You: a. Ask them to move out
b. Ask them to let you run your own house in your own way
c. Accept their way of doing things

Comments: _____

- M. You are in your 2nd year at the University and doing well but your family, which is very poor, needs financial help and your uncle suggests that you drop out of school and go to work in order to help them. Your uncle, who is your father's brother, is very wealthy and you feel that he should help his brother himself.

Would You: a. Leave school and go to work
b. Tell your uncle how you feel
c. Stay in school and ignore your uncle

Comments: _____

- A5. You are the oldest child in your family (there are 5 others; ages 4 to 17) and away at school when you get a letter from your aunt telling you that your parents are thinking of getting a divorce. You know that your parents have not been happy with each other but you are worried about the effect on your brothers and sisters.

Would You: a. Try to discourage them from getting a divorce
b. Ignore aunt's letter and not do anything

Comments: _____

- A6. You and your wife have jobs in town. Your relatives, most of whom are not working, are always coming to your house to eat and drink. Because of these expenses you cannot afford to buy the car that you want and you begin to resent the visits of your relatives.

Would You: a. Talk to your relatives about your feelings _____
 b. Say nothing and put up with the situation _____

Comments: _____

- B1. Three men from your Island are preparing for a special journey by canoe to another Island 200 miles away. This journey is made once every ten years on the same day and considered to be a sacred ritual. You hear on your radio (the only one in the village) that a typhoon is approaching. You tell the chief but he tells you that "He Knows" there will not be a storm and that the radio is wrong. He tells you not to say anything else to anyone about what you heard on the radio. He seems to have always been right in the past and you know that bad things happen to people who go against the chief's command.

Would You: a. Tell anyone what you heard on the radio _____
 b. Obey the chief _____

Comments: _____

- B2. On your Island fish are caught and distributed equally within the village. A friend of yours who has lived in the district center has come there with a new boat and engine and asked you to go into business with him catching and selling fish. This has never been done before in your village. You are not earning any money and there are no jobs available. Your friend says he will guarantee that you make at least \$200 a month.

Would You: a. Join him in his business _____
 b. Not join this business _____

Comments: _____

- B3. Your younger brother is seriously ill. You want him taken to the hospital but your parents insist that the local healer can cure him. You do not feel that the local healer can cure him but you cannot convince your parents. There does not appear to be time to try both. You are also concerned that if you forcibly take your brother to the hospital and he dies anyhow that your family would never forgive you. They would accept it as fate if he died after the healer's treatment.

Would You: a. Take him to the hospital anyhow _____
 b. Let your parents take him to the healer _____

Comments: _____

- B4. You work in a government agency. Your boss in this agency is also a traditional leader in your district. This leader is interested in the tourist business and has asked you to help in the repair of an old "men's house." You know that he will make money on this project but he is not paying people to do this work because he says that such work has always been done by the people of your village as a traditional obligation. Do you think you should work under these conditions?

a. Yes _____
b. No _____

Comments: _____

- B5. You have been appointed youth coordinator. There is very little for the teenagers to do and you plan to open up a center where there will be dances and other social activities. The only available land belongs to a man who has offered it to you for educational purposes but is not in favor of activities which he feels are untraditional. There is no place else to build this.

Would You: a. Try to change the owner's mind _____
 b. Agree not to have dances, etc. _____
 c. Forget about the project because young people will not be interested if they cannot dance _____

Comments: _____

- B6. You are a member of the district legislature. A vote has been called on a bill that will cause inconvenience or discomfort to people of your village for a period of time but will benefit the district in the long run. The chief of your village has asked you to use your influence to vote it down.

Would You: a. Do as the chief asks _____
 b. Not do as the chief asks _____

Comments: _____

- C1. You live on an outer Island and after three weeks back in the village you feel bored with life. You have a job that pays enough and your family wants you to stay. They tell you that the community needs you. You point out that you could be doing work in the district center that would help the entire district. You also would make more money and you tell your parents you would send some home. They say that they just want you to stay home.

Would You: a. Go to the district center _____
 b. Stay at home _____

Comments: _____

- C2. A large Japanese company is interested in building a large resort in an area near your village. They claim that through taxes and employment that this resort could bring an average of \$5,000 per year to every family in your village. The present owners of the land are willing to sell it to the firm. There is to be a vote in the community whether or not to let the project go ahead.

Would You: a. Vote Yes _____
 b. Vote No _____

Comments: _____

- C3. You must vote on the master plan for your community and make a choice between the construction of a port, which is seen as vital to further economic development; and the construction of a new sewage system which is important for health and sanitation reasons. Your father is a businessman and feels strongly that the port should be built first. What position would you take?

- a. The port should be first _____
b. The sewage system should be first _____

Comments: _____

- C4. Your community has an opportunity to participate in the urban renewal program. Some people feel that the paved roads and permanent concrete housing would improve the community and favor the program; others feel that it would change the community's traditional ways and oppose it. The U.S. Government would pay for the entire project.

- Would You Vote: a. For the urban renewal _____
b. Against the urban renewal _____

Comments: _____

- C5. A foreign business firm wishes to extract minerals from just off the shore of your Island. This would mean many new jobs for your Island and much additional money for the local economy. Some members of the community are opposed for fear that it would spoil the reef and seriously interfere with fishing and otherwise disrupt everyday life. You are a member of the Island legislature.

- Would You Vote: a. For the mining venture _____
b. Against the mining venture _____

Comments: _____

- C6. Your culture has always valued yams as a prestige crop. They take a long time to grow and cultivating is difficult. The agricultural department recommends planting beans which grow faster and require less attention. You could earn \$100 per acre per month growing beans, which would be exported to another Island. There is no market for yams because everyone grows their own. You like the idea but your relatives who share the land and farm with you to continue to grow yams. They say that the family has always gotten along that way so why change now.

- Would You:
- a. Try to persuade them to grow beans _____
 - b. Accept their position and forget about the beans _____
 - c. Find some land of your own and grow beans by yourself _____

Comments: _____

- D1. You have been offered two jobs which are very similar in pay and type of work. One is with a large well-established private company; and other is with a government agency which appears to provide greater opportunities for advancement.

- Would You:
- a. Choose the private company _____
 - b. Choose the government agency _____

Comments: _____

- D2. It has come to your attention a number of times that the director of your office has been using public funds to pay for supplies that have been going into a private business that he owns.

- Would You:
- a. Confront him by telling him that you know what he is doing _____
 - b. Report him to the proper authority _____
 - c. Not say anything about it _____

Comments: _____

- D3. You have been appointed to a responsible position in a government agency. Two individuals apply for work in this agency and you must hire one of them. One has a college education and appears to be more qualified than the other applicant who is only a high school graduate but who has been sent over with a note from your older brother asking you to try to help him out. You feel that both applicants could do the work required of them, and you are free to hire either one.

Would You: a. Hire the College graduate _____
 b. Hire the high school graduate _____

Comments: _____

- D4. You have a job working in a restaurant and you notice that the bartender is not charging his friends for their drinks. The owner of the restaurant is a very wealthy man. The bartender is not your friend.

Would You: a. Not say anything _____
 b. Tell the bartender that you know what he is
 doing and that you will report him to the
 owner if he doesn't stop _____
 c. Report him to the owner _____

Comments: _____

- D5. You have been accepted for two different jobs. One will pay \$150 a week, but you will be working on your own a great deal under a strict boss. In the other job you will be working with several young people, one a school friend, but you will get only \$100 per week. Which job do you choose?

a. The \$150 job with a strict boss _____
b. The \$100 job with your friend _____

Comments: _____

- D6. Your first job is with a bank and you are collecting loans in your home community. ^a made responsible for go to are quite upset and remind you that ^e The first people that you out before he died and that he never repaid ^a they had helped your uncle not expect that money back therefore you ^a aid them and that they do to pay the bank. ^a should not be asking them

- Would You:
- a. Tell them they must
 - b. Tell your supervisor pay _____
this case even though that you cannot handle
your job _____ though this might mean losing
 - c. Tell these people to
loan for them _____ that you will pay the bank

Comments: _____

- E1. You are driving in your car with a friend and he throws his empty can out of the window. There are no other cars in sight.

- Would You:
- a. Tell your friend he
 - b. Stop your car and tell he shouldn't do that _____
pick up the can tell your friend to
 - c. Not say or do anything _____

Comments: _____

- E2. As a result of a federal grant, money is being provided to build a special home to house and feed the senior citizens in your community who need help. Your grandmother is not getting proper care at home because everyone is too busy with work and school. Most of the family want to bring the grandmother to the "senior citizens" home to stay.

- Would You:
- a. Agree that the grandmother should be sent to the senior citizens home
 - b. Disagree that the grandmother should be sent to the senior citizens home _____

Comments: _____

E3. Your community has a chance to participate in the U.S. funded food stamp program. Some of the community leaders favor this program because many families would be able to purchase more food at no extra cost. Others oppose it because they feel it would make the people even more dependent upon the U.S. What would be your position?

- a. In favor _____
b. Against _____

Comments: _____

E4. The public health department in your community wants to open a family planning clinic. There has been some opposition to it and there is going to be a vote taken in the community. Some people feel that this is an "American" way of doing things and are afraid that the women and the young girls will start fooling around too much if they have "the pill," others say that it is good for communities to limit their population growth and that women have the right to decide when and how many children they want.

- Would You: a. Vote for the clinic _____
b. Vote against the clinic _____

Comments: _____

E5. Your new neighbors, whom you do not know very well, often leave their three year old child alone and locked up in the house for hours at a time.

- Would You: a. Talk to these new neighbors and tell them you are concerned by what they are doing _____
b. Report them to the proper authorities _____
c. Not say anything _____

Comments: _____

E6. To solve the drinking problem in your community it has been proposed that the sale of alcohol be totally prohibited. How would you vote?

- a. For prohibiting alcohol _____
- b. Against prohibiting alcohol _____

Comments: _____
